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TAGS: PHUM PGOV NU PBTS
SUBJECT: WHAT'S REALLY BEHIND THE MOSQUITO COAST INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT?

REF: MANAGUA 1047; MANAGUA 501; MANAGUA 415
MANAGUA 103 - JANUARY ELECTION FRAUD
2008 MANAGUA 1329 - HURRICANE FELIX

CLASSIFIED BY: Robert J. Callahan, Ambassador; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Six months have passed since the April 18 declaration of independence of the Mosquito Coast by the Council of Elders and the election of Reverend Hector Williams as the Wihta Tara (Miskito for "grand judge") to lead the people. The Ortega government continues to be silent and has refused to open a public dialogue with the independence movement leaders. A protest march, which was to culminate in a takeover of the Regional Government Offices was repressed by government supporters with police acquiescence (see REF A). Independence is not a new issue for Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast, which has passed through more than 100 years of various levels of autonomy from the central government. However, this latest iteration of the movement seems disingenuous and manipulated by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) and certain actors within the movement for their own political and personal purposes. END SUMMARY

SIX MONTH ANNIVERSARY OF INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT

¶2. (C) On April 19, the Council of Elders, an indigenous Miskito Indian group from the North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN), held an election and declared their independence from the central government (see refel B). The new "Wihta Tara" (Miskito for "grand judge") elected by the Miskito Council of Elders announced the formation of a new "Miskito army" for the first time since the 1890s. This Miskito "army" (not an organized armed force in any sense) and the Wihta Tara peacefully occupied YATAMA party headquarters in late April, after which the movement seemed to disappear from the media's radar. As the six-month anniversary of the independence movement approached, the central government had not issued an official statement about the independence declaration, nor had held any public talks with the Wihta Tara. Perhaps as an effort to call attention back to the independence movement, the Wihta Tara called on followers to join him in the unsuccessful march to take over the regional government offices in Bilwi, RAAN in mid-October (see REF A).

MOSQUITO COAST INDEPENDENCE IS NOT NEW

¶3. (U) The issue of independence for Nicaragua's Mosquito Coast spans over 100 years. The Caribbean coast of Nicaragua was independent from the central government until 1894, when it was forcibly annexed by the GON through a military campaign led by Rigoberto Cabezas. Before annexation, the Mosquito Coast was a British protectorate from 1655 until 1860, and ruled by a line of Miskito kings, the first of whom was crowned in England. The British protectorate over the Miskito Indians brought the English language and customs to the Caribbean Coast over the period, but U.K. claims were alternately disputed by Spain, the Central American Republics and the United States. [NOTE: U.S. opposition to the British protectorate was mainly due to fears that Britain would control Greytown at the mouth of the San Juan River and the proposed inter-oceanic canal through Nicaragua. END NOTE]

¶4. (U) An 1860 treaty between GON and the United Kingdom known as the Treaty of Managua transferred to Nicaragua the sovereignty over the entire Caribbean coast from Cabo Gracias a Dios to Greytown at the mouth of the San Juan River, but granted autonomy to the Indians in the Mosquito Reserve. [NOTE: The Mosquito Reserve is a narrow strip of territory that measures approximately 225 miles from Greytown in the south to the Wawa River in the north and inland approximately 40 miles from the Caribbean Coast to the eastern limit of the Nicaraguan highlands. END NOTE] From 1860 until 1894, the Mosquito Coast was essentially autonomous from the central government and self-governed by an elected Indian chief. The Miskito Indians rejected the suzerainty of Nicaragua over their territory, and even appealed to the Hapsburg emperor of Austria, who in 1880 sided with the Indians claim of a right to self-government. In 1894, Rigoberto Cabezas led a military campaign to annex the Reserve. Miskito Indians' and other coastal peoples appealed to England for protection, but to no avail.

FORCED ASSIMILATION FOLLOWED BY SOMOZA HANDS-OFF POLICY

¶5. (U) Following the Cabezas campaign, the Atlantic Coast was subjected to a decades-long campaign by the Managua central government to impose Spanish culture and language on the region, which was renamed the Zelaya Department (after the Nicaraguan President). Schools that taught English or indigenous languages were forced to adopt Spanish language and textbooks - a practice that was deeply resented by the local populations. In the early 1900s an Afro-Miskito leader from Bilwi, Samuel Pitts, raised an army of over 6,000 Miskito Indians to attack Managua in order to regain their independence and fight the "illegal" incorporation of

the Caribbean Coast into Nicaragua. His indigenous army traveled as far as the San Juan River until a severe outbreak of malaria decimated their ranks. Pitts returned to the coast to raise another army for a second campaign, but was ambushed and killed by agents of the GON.

¶6. (U) Through the ensuing years the region was economically exploited by foreign companies (with the blessing of the central government) for its rich resources, but was generally ignored by the GON in terms of providing other public services available on the Pacific side of Nicaragua. During the Somoza era (1934 - 1979) Managua had a "hands off" policy that allowed independent development of the region and a sense of autonomy that is still frequently referred to as "the golden time" because there were plenty of jobs at foreign companies which operated banana plantations, lumber businesses and gold mines. The 1979 Sandinista Revolution irrevocably ended the quasi-independence of the region and brought the Atlantic - Pacific conflict back.

MISQUITO COAST & SANDINISTAS

¶7. (U) Prior to the Sandinista Revolution, some Miskito indigenous leaders, such as Brooklyn Rivera, received training from Sandinista guerril

¶8. (U) During the conflict, the Sandinista-leaning Atlantic Coast leaders such as Ray Hooker convinced the central government that the way to peace would be to grant limited autonomy to the diverse region. In 1987, Ray Hooker and other like-minded leaders were able to draft and secure the passage of Law 28 in the National Assembly that created the RAAN and RAAS from the former Zelaya department. The legislation provided a framework for regional autonomy with some level of regional integration with the rest of Nicaragua. It was sufficient to convince Miskito and other guerrilla leaders to peacefully end their conflict with the Sandinistas.

POST AUTONOMY - NEW POLITICAL ASSIMILATION

¶9. (U) With the return of democracy to Nicaragua in the 1990 victory of Violeta Chamorro, new hope came to the region that it would not be neglected nor exploited by the central government for its rich natural resources. Regional parties such as PAMUK and YATAMA (Miskito for "Sons of the Living Earth") held sway in the initial elections, but by the election of Arnaldo Aleman in 1996 the better organized and financed national parties, such as the FSLN and the Constitutional Liberal Party (PLC), had established a firm presence in the region. Coastal people realized that the Autonomous Laws did not provide true financial autonomy to control their own development, as the central government exercised enormous control over regional budgets and national programs. National party control over state institutions, such as the Supreme Court and the Supreme Electoral Council, also discouraged the progress and development of regional political parties. Combined with the tremendous wave of Pacific-coast migrants to the region following the war, regional parties have been forced to align with national parties in order to survive.

WHY INDEPENDENCE NOW?

¶10. (C) The Wihta Tara's April 19 public declaration of independence started the most recent political showdown between the RAAN indigenous se

¶11. (C) Despite these valid arguments for independence, contacts tell us that the real force behind the current independence movement is Oscar Hodgson, the Council of Elder's legal representative. Hodgson reportedly worked for Lenin Cerna and the Sandinistas' intelligence service during the 1980s and continues to have ties with the FSLN party. He wanted a position in the regional government, but was passed over. Contacts have told us that Hodgson is manipulating the independence movement to enter into a negotiation with the FSLN. It is widely believed that any chaos in the Atlantic Coast through the independence movement would prevent free and fair Regional Council elections on March 7, 2010, and help the FSLN consolidate control in the region. Fagoth was allegedly dispatched by President Ortega in May to negotiate with Hodgson and the Wihta Tara, but the closed-door discussions allegedly broke down when the Council of Elders asked for more money than Ortega was willing to pay.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) While there are deep historical grievances behind the current independence movement, our contacts tell us that they are suspicious of the timing and true motives of the organizers. Oscar Hodgson, a trained lawyer and the legal advisor to the Miskito Council of Elders, is known to be an FSLN-sympathizer. Post believes that he may be manipulating the independence movement to create leverage in negotiating with the FSLN nationally. It is highly suspicious that neither the Government of Nicaragua (GON) nor President Ortega has made any official statements about the April 19 declaration months after the fact. What is behind the GON silence? Post believes that FSLN may also be allowing the current independence movement as part of a Machiavellian strategy to keep coastal people off-balance in the run-up to regional elections set for March 7, 2010. The independence movement could create a crisis in the region that might force the National Assembly to cancel or postpone regional elections. In the absence of a clear statement by the FSLN government about the movement, combined with public accusations by its surrogates (Steadman Fagoth, Brooklyn Rivera) that the U.S. is behind it, the movement can be manipulated by the FSLN to serve its political purposes. We will continue to monitor events as they unfold.

CALLAHAN